On Be/com/ing a Postgraduate Student: Transitions in Accessing M level Studies (0110)

Burke Penny Jane [1], [1]*Roehampton University, London, United Kingdom*

Outline

This paper is part of a larger research project on different forms of transition to Masters level study in higher education, including transitions for students from traditionally under-represented backgrounds. This paper will focus on two key issues. The first will be to explore competing concepts of 'widening participation' in the context of postgraduate, rather than undergraduate, level study, and the implications of different conceptualisations for developing a methodological and analytical framework. The second will be a preliminary analysis of the data, focusing on transitions in relation to the research participants' experiences of assessment and writing at postgraduate level and their accounts of how this shapes their self-understandings and identities as learners and as postgraduate students.

The body of research focusing on widening participation in higher education has raised concerns that educational policies and practices have paid too little attention to the academic structures, cultures and practices which might exacerbate, rather than combat, exclusion in Higher Education (HE) (Jones and Thomas, 2005). A growing body of research has focused on student experience, to identify and examine the multiple barriers and complex issues that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds might face when participating in HE (Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; Gorard *et al.*, 2007). This body of work has helped to illuminate the key transition points such students need to negotiate as they move into unfamiliar academic territory, which tends to privilege those forms of cultural and linguistic capital largely unfamiliar to students from historically under-represented groups (Reay *et al.*, 2001; 2005). However, the focus of this research has been on widening access to and participation in undergraduate level study. There has been far less attention to widening access to and participation in higher education at postgraduate level.

One of the ongoing dilemmas of conceptualizing widening participation is the ways that it then constructs students in certain ways; sometimes reproducing deficit subjectivities and homogenizing assumptions about students who are constituted as different and as problematic. This tends to exacerbate rather than disrupt inequalities at play in higher education and tends to focus the problem on individual students who are constructed in deficit terms. Yet, it is important to understand widening participation in terms of persistent patterns of inequality, which relate to intersections of social differences of for example age, class, ethnicity, race and gender.

Research focusing on assessment and feedback practices in higher education has considered the experiences of 'non-traditional' students undergoing transitions mostly as undergraduate students, and has shown that academic writing and assessment practices often operate in exclusive ways, particularly

because of an over-emphasis on 'skills' and a lack of attention to writing processes, methodologies and epistemologies (Burke and Jackson, 2007; Creme, 2003; Lillis, 2001). Such research has contributed to approaches to support students to meet the requirements and expectations of traditional assessment frameworks, for example, through formative assessment and feedback (Burke and Jackson, 2007). However, it has also exposed the limitation of current understanding about the impact of different modes of assessment and feedback on students from these historically under-represented groups (see for example, Archer *et al*., 2003; Bowl, 2003; Burke, 2002; Burke, 2007; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Clegg and David, 2006; Morley, 2003).

Such work highlights a range of issues that this paper will consider, including i) the problematic deficit constructions of students going through these transitions (Archer, 2003; Archer *et al*., 2003; Burke, 2007; Leathwood, 2006; Morley, 2001; Reay, 2001; Webb, 1997); ii) time problems caused by the intensive nature of the transition (Burke and Dunn, 2006); iii) the use of pedagogic, assessment and language (oral and written) approaches which do not take account of the needs of students from under-represented backgrounds (Clegg and David, 2006; Creme, 2003; Creme and Lea, 2001; Howie and Tauchert, 2002; Lillis, 2001; Lillis and Ramsey, 1997; Morley, 2003); and iv) a disjuncture between forms of learning/experience of non-traditional students and forms of learning demanded by institutions (Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Howie and Tauchert, 2002; Lillis, 2001; Lucas and Issroff, 2003).

Key questions the paper will explore include:

•   How might 'widening participation' be conceptualised in the context of postgraduate, rather than undergraduate, study?
•   How do students experience transitions into postgraduate level study and how does this shape their experiences and understanding of assessment and writing practices and conventions at M level?
•   How do these experiences shape their self-understandings and identities as learners and as postgraduate students?

The paper will draw on semi-structured interviews with students undertaking Masters level programmes at one case study institution, as well as their journal reflections of their learning and transition experiences. As part of a larger study, eight students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds were interviewed at different points in the academic year and kept reflective journals of their experiences. The data has been analysed in relation to the research questions and draws on the theoretical and conceptual perspectives of critical sociology and poststructuralism, to understand and deconstruct the operations of inequalities and exclusions in higher education. This includes a focus on the ways that inequalities of age, class, ethnicity, gender and race intersect in the formation of learning identities and in experiences of transition. Feminist poststructural perspectives will provide an analytical framework to understand relations of power and processes of subjective construction and the ways this shapes educational participation and transition. Such

perspectives will be combined with the body of work that develops an understanding of academic writing as social practice, which emphasises the centrality of epistemological, ontological and methodological concerns in understanding writing practices and students' experiences of these.

In drawing on such perspectives and analysing the data, the paper will argue that an understanding of WP in postgraduate level study must be underpinned by an attention to difference, inequality and power. Such a conceptualisation is not only important in developing an appropriate methodological framework for understanding WP but also in making sense of students' experiences of learning and writing in postgraduate level contexts. I will draw on examples from the research participants' accounts to illuminate my points.

Word count: 996

References

Archer, L. (2003) 'Social Class and Higher Education', in: L. Archer, M. Hutchings & A. Ross (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion*, London and New York, Routledge Falmer.
Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) 'Identities, inequalities and higher education', in: L. Archer, M. Hutchings & A. Ross (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion*.
Archer, L., Hutchings, M., Leathwood, C. and Ross, A. (2003) 'Widening participation in higher education: Implications for policy and practice', in: L. Archer, M. Hutchings & A. Ross (Eds) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion*, London, Routledge Falmer.
British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2007) *Ethical Guidelines*, BERA
Bowl, M. (2003) *Non-Traditional Entrants to Higher Education: 'They talk about people like me'*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books.
Burke, P. and Dunn, S. (2006) 'Communicating Science: exploring reflexive pedagogical approaches', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(2), pp. 219-232.
Burke, P.J. (2002) *Accessing Education effectively widening participation*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books.
Burke, P.J. (2007) 'Men accessing education: masculinities, identifications and widening participation', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(4), pp. 411 - 424.
Burke, P.J. and Jackson, S. (2007) *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning: Feminist Interventions*, London, Routledge.
Black, P.J. and Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box* (online version available at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbla9810.htm).
Clegg, S. and David, M. (2006) 'Passion, pedagogies and the project of the personal in higher education', *Twenty-First Century Society*, 1(2), pp. 149 – 165.
Creme, P. (2003) 'Why Can't We Allow Students to be More Creative', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 8(2), pp. 273-277.
Creme, P. and Lea, M. (2001) *Writing at University: A Guide for Students*, Buckingham and Philidelphia, Open University Press.
Gorard, S., Adnett, N., May, H., Slack, K., Smith, E. and Thomas, L. (2007) *Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books.
Howie, G. and Tauchert, A. (2002) *Gender, Teaching and Research in Higher Education,* Hampshire, England.
Jones, R. and Thomas, L. (2005) The 2003 UK Government Higher Education White Paper: a critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda, *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(5), pp. 615-630.

Leathwood, C. (2006) 'Gendered constructions of lifelong learning and the learner in the UK policy context', in C. Leathwood and B. Francis (Eds) *Gender and Lifelong Learning: Critical feminist engagements,* Oxon, Routledge.

Lillis, T. (2001) *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*, London, Routledge.

Lillis, T.M. and Ramsey, M. (1997) 'Student Status and the Question of Choice in Academic Writing', *Research and Practice in Adult Learning Bulletin*, Spring(32), pp. 15-22.

Lucas, L. and Issroff, K. (2003) *The Learning Needs of Mature and Part Time Students at UCL*, London, University College London.

Morley, L. (2001) 'Subjected to review: engendering quality and power in higher education', *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(5), pp. 465- 478.

Morley, L. (2003) *Quality and Power in Higher Education*, Berkshire, England and Philadelphia, Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press.

Reay, D. (2001) 'Finding or Losing Yourself?: Working-class Relationships to Education', *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(4), pp. 333-346.

Reay, D., David, M. and Ball, S. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: Class, Race, Gender and Higher Education*, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books.

Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M. and Ball, S. (2001) 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, 'Race' and the Higher Education Choice Process', *Sociology*, 35(4), pp. 855 - 874.

Webb, S. (1997) 'Alternative Students? Conceptualizations of Difference', in: J. Williams (Ed) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: the Discourse of selectivity and Equity*, Buckingham, SHRHE and Open University Press.